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Functional masterpiece: Woodbury County Courthouse

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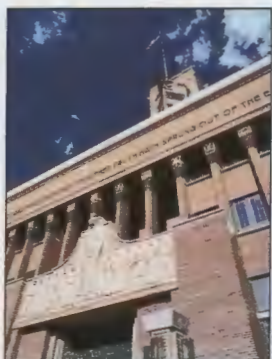
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Functional masterpiece

WOODBURY COUNTY COURTHOUSE



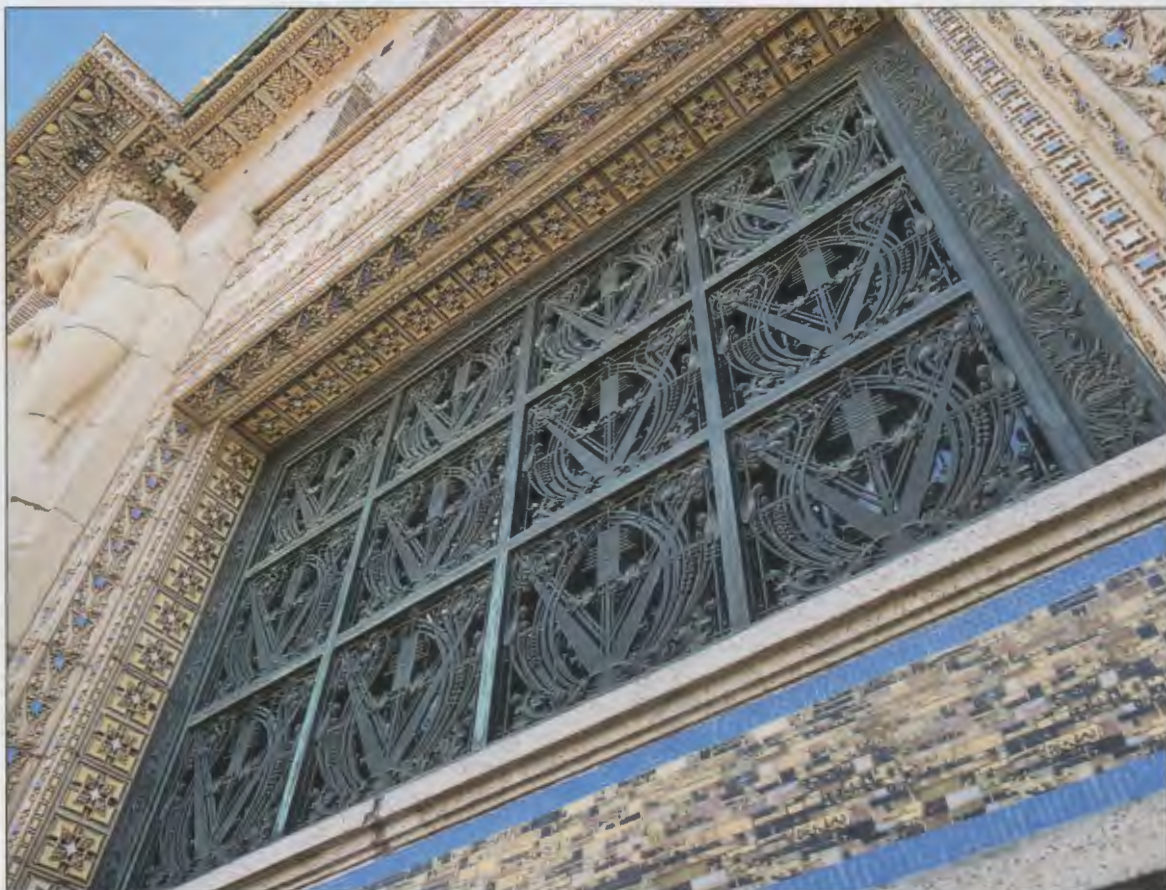
Above: Detail of main entrance shows lanelli's lintel sculptural relief, the brick colonnade with terra cotta capitals, and the prow of the flagged tower above with lanelli's 'eagle in flight' as an ornament.

Right: A decorative metal grill, ceramic tile, and glazed terra cotta details the above side entrance.

In late 1914, the Sioux City architect William Steele, who from 1896 to 1899 had apprenticed in the Chicago office of Louis Sullivan, won a limited local competition to build the Woodbury County Courthouse. Though his winning entry was Gothic Revival, Steele persuaded the County Board of Supervisors to build a 'Prairie School' design instead. Lacking the confidence to execute the extensive commission alone, Steele invited as associate architects his friend George Grant Elmslie and Elmslie's partner, William Purcell. The renowned Minneapolis partnership revised the design extensively. In March 1915 the new design was reviewed and tentatively approved by a committee of city supervisors. The revised design called for a 60-foot-high brick block of courtrooms and county offices surmounted by a seven-story high brick office tower. The scheme was not without its detractors. Concerned businessmen protested that local soil conditions could not support such a structure, that the proposed windowless basement would prove intolerable, that the tower was an unnecessary "architectural experiment — unusual and extreme," and that most

local citizens preferred a courthouse of "ordinary and usual design." Despite criticism, the revised design was adopted and the courthouse was built largely as Steele, Purcell, and Elmslie had intended, though only eight stories high and with basement apertures of obscure glass. Completed in two years on March 1, 1918 at a cost of \$850,000, the result is a unique and wondrous civic center, perhaps the most significant building in all of Iowa.

In plan, the rectangular base is a square donut, its central void providing an atrium lobby. On the elevated entry level, three of the donut's four sides house mundane county-seat agencies all symmetrically arranged, while the fourth forms a definite back to the building providing space for non-public affairs. The two-story lobby is illuminated by natural light from a glass dome that seems to billow out, uniting the interior with the exterior and relieving the space of its need for a ceiling. It offers its 'dome-ness' as an established icon, a familiar courthouse accoutrement, even if somewhat out of place as a half-sphere in an otherwise completely orthogonal structure. The four courtrooms are on the



Project: Woodbury County Courthouse Restoration
Location: Sioux City, IA
Architect: Wetherell Ericsson Leusink Architects, PLC
Electrical Engineer: Pulley & Associates, Inc.
Mechanical Engineer: Pulley & Associates, Inc.
Structural Engineer: Peterson Engineers
Photographer: George Lindblade

DANIEL NAEGELE, PH.D.



View of rotunda including steel-framed dome and polychrome interior atrium. The centered ornate stair is flanked by John Norton's mural, a memorial to WW-I.

GEORGE HENDERSON

Right: Detail of rotunda mezzanine shows pendant and post lights, extensive terra cotta at ceiling and capital, and a small fragment of two of Norton's lobby murals.

Far right (top): The courthouse block from northwest as it rises from its foundations on June 20, 1916. Sioux City's Richardsonian Romanesque City Hall is in the background. (Courtesy of the Sioux City Public Museum, Sioux City, IA)

Far right (middle): The courthouse under construction as the metal frame of rotunda dome and the frame of the tower emerge from the block in October 1916. (Courtesy of the Sioux City Public Museum, Sioux City, IA)

Far right (bottom): The back (east) side of the Courthouse as it was completed in 1917. (Courtesy of the Sioux City Public Museum, Sioux City, IA)



mezzanine above the entry level. Each is identical: symmetrical and with an ecclesiastic aura; of natural brick, cork, and leathers (all magnificently restored); dominated by a gabled skylight that establishes a vertical axis; reveling in Prairie School details including sumptuous pendant lights and carefully modulated stained glass openings. Oddly, yet purposefully, the tower rises directly above the dome. From the interior atrium, one has no sense of the tower's presence. Indeed, a 'dome room' is slid between useable tower and block, allowing daylight to enter under the tower's skirt. Framed in steel and with small floor plates, the tower features V-shaped bay lobby windows. It houses offices, and initially it provided space for expansion. Its top floor is a quintessential Prairie-style room detailed with banks of high clerestory windows. Interior space flows outward beneath the ornamental terra cotta soffits of abstract foliage. A narrow outside promenade permits observation of the city from above. In all its strangeness, the tower constitutes a unique addition to the history of high-rise form.

Besides the obvious prestige that size and civic function confer, Woodbury County Courthouse is a rare example of urban Prairie School. As such it is instructive, for Purcell and Elmslie are known largely for their single-family houses, and the major monuments of the Prairie School are mostly, though not exclusively, suburban. Indeed, one senses a potential contradiction between the theory of Prairie School design and a commission for an authoritative building situated in the middle of the man-made, gridded American city. For how to remain true to the fundamental principles of that style while at the same time addressing an urban situation and central-authority program for which the style is, at best, questionably suited? Wright and Sullivan, persistent sources for the School's formal preferences, offered various approaches as precedent: Sullivan's decorated high-rises, the Charnley House, Unity Temple, and most obviously the 'urban' banks of Sullivan and Wright's small bank/hotel combo in Mason City. However, the sheer size of the courthouse, its established building-type *parti*, and its program as architectural manifestation of central governmental authority, suggest such approaches irrelevant. More comparable are Richardson's renowned courthouses (Sioux City's adjacent City Hall is Richardsonian



Romanesque as are many of its finer monuments), and Henry Hombostel's then-popular Oakland City Hall (1911-14). Both combine tower and block to symbolize, though in very different ways, the conjunction of laissez-faire business and governmental authority.

In a similar manner, city block and tower are combined in the Woodbury County Courthouse though its fabric is decidedly Prairie School. Of a yellowish glazed Roman brick, it eschews the muscularity of traditional granites and marbles. The earth of Sioux City, not the stones of antiquity, has built this building. In contradistinction to the overall formal symmetries of its composition, the courthouse 'grows' from its site, this the result of how the building meets the ground, stretches itself to turn a corner, and how its brick detailing and terra cotta ornament massage the complex

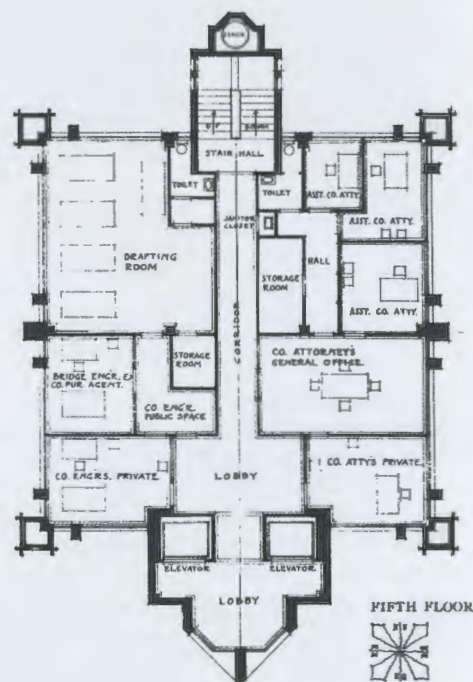
into a unity. As with many Prairie School buildings, its rhetoric is often representational: mottoes are embossed on the building; John Norton's rather stiff murals adorn an elevated main lobby clearly distinguished by a glass dome; and the relief sculptures of the Chicagoan Alfonso Iannelli signify the two principal entries — thresholds that mark the transition between the outer urban environment and the sanctity of a distinctly interior world. Together with an abundance of terra cotta capitals and surrounds, each of these representational devices serves to both color the building 'Prairie' and speak a traditional formal language. Thus while Iannelli's reliefs elevate entries to meaningful thresholds between an outer world of commerce and an inner world of ecclesiastical-like justice (the principal relief is remarkably religious: a looming, bearded, colossal flanked by twelve human-scale disciples), they also reinforce an expected symmetry and construe as façade what otherwise might be only elevation. Terra cotta capitals cloak the building in the Jeffersonian governmental garb. Simultaneously, these capitals organically ease the transition between vertical and horizontal on the exterior while imbuing the lobby interior with a sense of the exotic. There is, too, the authority of the main façade's elaborate colonnade — again an accoutrement of temple origin, but one essential to this building type. Not of Greek cylinders but rectangular and brick, the colonnade possesses all the power of symbolic structure. At the same time, it suggests itself as an expressionistic and organic extension of the brick block, veiling the building's face while conveying some sense of its twentieth-century structuring.

Since 1991, the Des Moines firm of Wetherell, Ericsson, Leusink has meticulously restored this little-known masterpiece of Prairie School design — the largest civic structure ever produced in that idiom. It is to their credit that the Woodbury County Courthouse, at one time neglected and unappreciated and suffering from inevitable updates, is today the pride of Sioux City. More importantly and to their very great credit, presently, when visiting this edifice, one enters not a facsimile museum piece — a too tidy blast-from-the-past that looks as if it were built yesterday — but a working building, a courthouse that functions well on a daily basis and is a Prairie School masterpiece as well. That is to say, in Sioux City, a delicate and subtle restoration has resulted in a hardly noticeable renewal. The temporal dimension has been encouraged to stay. Neither age nor aura has been erased. Everything is as it was; but exquisite care, inherent intelligence, and an unusual amount of empathy have ensured that the presence

of the past supports the needs of today and of the future.

In the now-past age of high modernism, a building that combined tartan with Cartesian grid, steel frame with bearing wall construction, urban design with suburban philosophy, and the preestablished formal expressions of Prairie School with those of the traditional courthouse type, could hardly have been fully appreciated. Today, however, the resolution of such apparent contradiction in a seamless work of undeniable genius is valued for its complexity, authenticity, and craft; for its relentless assertion of its beliefs, and for the unique quality of its rooms and spaces. That the artifact is so magnificently restored is reason enough to visit Sioux City; that its convictions have again found favor insists that it not be left unnoticed.

—Daniel Naegele's writings on representation, architectural photography, and modern architecture and art have been published in the U.S., England, and New Zealand, and have been translated to Danish, Italian, French, and Spanish. Dan is an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University.



Above: Plan of fifth floor, a typical tower-floor plan.



Left: The courthouse block and tower from the north-west, its main entrance and colonnade to the right, and the side entrance to the left.